The Creative Triangle

Cinematographers, production designers and directors form a creative triumvirate that has evolved over the last 100 years. How has that discussion traditionally been conducted and how can it be improved?

by Todd Longwell

The three-way collaboration between director, cinematographer and production designer is nearly as old as motion pictures themselves. But few people outside the industry understand what the trio does individually, much less collectively. Even insiders have trouble understanding the exact nature of this complex working relationship. "All I know from talking to people in all three of those positions is: If they're not in harmony, the film is in trouble," admits noted author and film critic Leonard Maltin.

"Usually, the director of photography will be hired in the last weeks of preproduction only to waste the first week of prep getting up to speed with creative and production challenges that have been in limbo because this team — director, director of photography and production designer — have not had the time to together visualize the solutions necessary to bring the story to life," says Daryn Okada, ASC, president of the American Society of Cinematographers.

"Basically, those are three of the principal and the earliest components to come on to really deal with the visualization of the story," says Thomas A. Walsh, president of the Art Directors Guild. "It's a triangle of sorts, but we're all there to service the director, obviously, and the script. That's not to say that the costume designer or any other of the creative
We tie ourselves down."

Says Okada, "When a producer is experienced enough to hire the cinematographer in the first stages of preproduction — even if that time is non-consecutive — meaningful creative decisions can be set forth. Those understandings early in preproduction results in using that time to efficiently solve technical and budgetary challenges with a more accurate vision to the story. And this process leads to a productive shoot utilizing the available resources to bring the best product to the screen."

When the three do finally get together, the discussion typically focuses on colors, textures, shapes and light sources. "We're talking about not only the design of the picture but how to make that design actually photographable," says cinematographer Dariusz Wolski, ASC. "There are so many decisions that need to be made in regard to determining what the film is going to look like."

Apted believes that the cinematographer's role in preproduction should be expended whenever possible, and that it's the director's job to make sure that creative dialogue takes place. "It's crucial, because these are decisions that the cinematographer is going to have to live with the whole run of the shoot," he says. "Before any important decisions about colors are made or I would sign off on a set, I'd make sure the director of photography sees it."

While the production designer is a constant presence in the director's orbit during prep, when the cameras get rolling, the cinematographer becomes the director's primary visual collaborator and, in many ways, the second in command. "The director of photography sets the tone for the whole crew, the way everybody conducts themselves and behaves," observes Apted. "So I'm very mindful of that when I'm casting the cinematographer. We need to have a close relationship — I want to know that there can be a shorthand between us, that we're on the same page, that we have a similar sense of humor and a similar way of how we want to work. We've all heard a thousand times what a collaborative medium film is. Well, there's an emotional content to collaboration. A real collaboration is a spiritual union, as much as anything else."

The triangular relationship between director, cinematographer and production designer has evolved over time, but the most dramatic recent change has been brought on by advances in digital technology, specifically, the use of pre-visualization software that enables filmmakers to experiment with camera angles, compositions and movement on 3-D virtual sets. "I find that if you're not staying on your toes, previs can make you a little lazy," says cinematographer Salvatore Totino, ASC. "There's so much discussion that takes place over the pre-visuals that the director and everybody else can get locked into a plan, and it starts to restrict you. I tend to not like to think about it too much, because I'm always improvising on the day and changing something that I think is adding more to the film."

Director Gore Verbinski, a proponent of digital pre-vis, used it extensively to prepare for shooting his two Pirates of the Caribbean sequels. However, he is also conscious of its limitations. "You can't quite access it," says Verbinski. "In a production meetings, I might instead grab a 15-inch model of our pirate ship and say, 'The crane is going to be here. Here's the ceiling of the stage. We can't back up enough, because the boat's taking up too much of the stage.' You almost have to touch something at that point."

In the end, this creative triangle seems to be a classic case of as much as things change, they remain the same. "When there are three people who have different visions, it's a bit of a problem," says Wolski. "But if you've got three talented people sharing a vision, it's fantastic."